

Songs from a modern lover: Jonathan Richman at The Southgate House

By Hiram Lee
4 November 2008

American singer-songwriter Jonathan Richman performed an outstanding set at Newport, Kentucky's Southgate House on October 24.

Richman is best known as the founder and leader of The Modern Lovers, a band formed in 1970 which had a significant influence on the punk rock musicians who emerged near the end of that decade. The band split just a few years into its career when Richman chose to pursue more melodic music and experiment with different rhythms that allowed for more freedom and improvisation.

Performing a stripped-down brand of pop music influenced by 1950s rock and doo-wop, Richman remained something of a cult figure for several decades until 1998, when he was introduced to a new generation of listeners with his appearance in the Farrelly Brothers' film *There's Something About Mary*.

Even more than in his recordings, one gets the best sense of Richman as an artist in his live performances. His concerts today have an intimate quality. They are spontaneous, in the best sense of the word, and performed without a set list. Richman improvises lines and verses, sings in several languages and translates line after line into English for his audience. The instrumentation is limited to Richman's own acoustic guitar and the drums of his longtime collaborator Tommy Larkins. Richman often steps away from the microphone while performing and moves to the front of the stage to sing and play directly to the audience. His voice carries surprisingly well, and he often sets aside his guitar altogether in favor of singing unaccompanied, typically with his hands held over his heart.

The singer opened his Southgate show with the title track from his latest album *Because Her Beauty is Raw and Wild*. His set drew heavily on material from this

2008 work, a moving collection of songs which deal primarily with themes of love, loss, and the value of experience and discovery.

In "The Lovers are Here and They're Full of Sweat," also taken from his latest album, Richman sang of a couple who make their way through a number of emotional states, struggling one moment, happily in love the next. Whatever ultimately became of them, he sang admiringly of the way the couple were going to "take this sterile place and make it live."

With his sense of humor fully intact, Richman stopped the song suddenly near its end and said to that crowd, "I know what you're thinking, you're thinking 'Okay, Jonathan, but what does it sound like in French?'" He then began the song's French-language "twin," a radically different version of the work called "Le Printemps Des Amoureux Est Venu."

It was the love songs, above all, that had the greatest impact that evening. Richman has a gift for writing them. In "Her Mystery Not of High Heels and Eye Shadow," one of the highlights of the concert, he sang "she rocks, she swings, she delights in the faded things/Her mystery not of high heels and eye shadow." As is evident in this composition, Richman has little use for official definitions of beauty and often sings of his love for "real" people and real things.

As he sang "My Baby Love Love Loves Me" with its line "even more than I prayed for" repeated over and over, Richman would drop to his knees, looking upward with his hands stretched far out to his sides, singing once again without his microphone. One was taken by the sincerity and sense of elation communicated in his performance. There were many such moments to be found throughout the evening.

Along with these songs taken from his two or three most recent albums, Richman occasionally reached

farther back into his catalogue. To the delight of the audience he sang “Pablo Picasso,” one of his best-known compositions from his time with The Modern Lovers. It’s a well-loved, fan-favorite but ultimately a slight composition when compared to his more mature work. Richman, now 57 years old, perhaps feels an obligation to touch on some of his past work, but clearly feels more at home performing newer songs. He politely declined to play a number of older works requested by audience members near the front of the stage.

Perhaps the most moving song performed during the show was “As My Mother Lay Lying,” both the last song played and the last song from *Because Her Beauty is Raw and Wild*. The song, written about the death of his mother, clearly affected Richman as he sang of her time in a nursing home, “Now just bones and silver hair, my restless twisting mother sleeping there/As my mother lay lying, I learned/As my mother lie dying, I learned some more.” It’s a haunting composition, with a simple melody which reveals itself slowly and is perfectly suited to the song’s lyrics. It deserves to be counted among Richman’s very best work.

Jonathan Richman showed himself to be a sincere and thoughtful artist during his performance at the Southgate House. He continues to be an energetic and able performer. His best work, much of it on display that evening, contains a sense of humor free from cynicism and, in his more serious efforts, a sober and accepting approach to life in its best and least moments. He is a genuine talent.

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